

Introduction

Samuele Grassi, Fiorenzo Fantaccini

Università degli Studi di Firenze

(<samuele.grassi@gmail.com>; <fiorenzo.fantaccini@unifi.it>)

Dal centro al cerchio, e sì dal cerchio al centro
movesi l'acqua in un ritondo vaso,
secondo ch'è percosso fuori o dentro.
Dante, *Paradiso*, iv, 1-3

From centre to the circle, and so back
From circle to the centre, water moves
In the round chalice, even as the blow
Impels it, inwardly, or from without.
Trans. by Henry F. Cary (1814)

Wir durchlaufen alle eine exzentrische Bahn.
J.C.F. Hölderlin, *Hyperion* (1797)

We all travel an eccentric path.
Trans. by Charles Larmore (2006)

Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make
eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through
that tyranny, that people should be eccentric.
Eccentricity has always abounded when and where
strength of character has abounded;
and the amount of eccentricity in a society
has generally been proportional to the amount of genius,
mental vigour, and moral courage it contained.
John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859)

In an article in *Vogue* in 1963, the art critic Lawrence Alloway referred to Francis Bacon as “a great, shocking, eccentric painter”. His “eccentricity” was attributed to the terrifying figures in his paintings and the exacting, distorted vision of the human body. Bacon was born in Dublin in 1909, yet his relationship with Ireland was “somewhat problematic”, due to his “Anglo-Irish origins, homosexuality and a reputation for challenging paintings” (Barber

2008, 125). He moved to London in 1922 and never returned to Ireland. His inclusion in the Canon of Irish Art has been gradual and difficult to accept, culminating in 1998 with Bacon's London studio presented to the Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane. It was then removed with all its contents and reconstructed in Ireland, where it opened to the public in 2001.

Like Samuel Beckett's, Bacon's "Irishness" has long been considered eccentric. His relationship with Ireland suffered all the consequences of his being, to borrow Teresa de Lauretis's definition, an "eccentric subject": that is to say, a subject included in a system and yet resisting the system itself, exceeding the rigidity of limits/borders that traditionally compel one to be either inside or outside it, contradicting and erasing the peripherality of dominant positions, deconstructing conventional notions of "margin(s)" and "centre(s)". This is why we chose one of Bacon's provocative "screaming Pope" series of works for the cover of this issue.

When we first thought about this collection of essays, we had all this in mind, even though, as Peter Somerville-Large states, "eccentricity is a stiffen word to define" (1990, xi). We also had in mind the definitions of "eccentric" in the Oxford English Dictionary – "not placed centrally or arranged symmetrically about a centre" –, and the Merriam-Webster Dictionary – "1. *a*: deviating from an established or usual pattern or style; *b*: deviating from conventional or accepted usage or conduct especially in odd or whimsical ways. 2. *a*: deviating from a circular path; elliptical; *b*: located elsewhere than at the geometrical center; *also*: having the axis or support so located" –, as well as the idea of something irregular, erratic, peculiar, unstable, unfocused – not in the commonly pejorative sense generally attributed to this protean, elusive, often disharmonious term.

We ultimately opted for the hyphenated spelling "ex-centric" (inspired by the Greek etymology ἔκκεντρος: ἔκ, "out of" + κέντρον, "centre") as an invitation to foreground the word "centre", which is obviously crucial to the concept of eccentricity. Western thought rests on the idea of classification, hierarchy, and consequently of an archetypal fixed centre, irradiating/reproducing other, similar centres around the main one. The hyphenated spelling thus reaffirms the idea of circularity included in the concept, and at the same time rethink the centre as a non-static, mobile, fluid, permeable, non-hierarchical notion. When thinking of how to conceive of the "centre" as subtext informing the essays collected in this issue, especially in its relation to what exceeds its limit(s), we were inevitably also inspired by Jacques Derrida's much exploited reading of the centre as something "other" than losing the centre, that is, something crucially occupying a position inside the centre, yet at the same time standing outside it (1966: 292). For Derrida, this necessary act of resistance to the founding binary oppositions of Western thought relates to the creation of a radical "outside" in the "inside" – of structures, politics, thinking, and philosophy as much as in life in general (see Newman 2001).

Ex-Centric Ireland therefore gathers diverse contributions addressing issues of marginality, liminality, border-crossing, periphery, migration, fringe and their implications for the study of Irish society and culture. It considers ex-centricity as a heterogeneous series of complex positionings outside a centre that is conventionally identified with normativity, identity, and regimes of truth. The position of Ireland – historical, as well as geographical and cultural – is addressed by this special issue against the backdrop of the current drive towards a seemingly suicidal global capitalist market and, conversely, the attempts to shape alternative forms of non-normative locations of resistance. The essays collected here deal with different areas of the Humanities and Social, Philosophical, and Political Studies. Their authors present challenging views questioning the stability of approaches, methods, and techniques in favour of dynamic, plural, and multiple perspectives.

A group of contributions centre around representations of ex-centricity on the Irish stage. Richard Allen Cave looks at the recent dramatic adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (2012) by Neil Bartlett, staged at Dublin's Abbey Theatre. Bartlett has twice attempted such a dramatic staging (the first was in 1994), and Cave discusses the major differences between his two versions. The recent one is more directly a dramatization of the novel, and is characterized by the use of a chorus, whose presence in the play creates a post-modern framework that offers audiences multiple perspectives – political, social, moral, aesthetic – from which to experience and critique the novel, this particular adaptation, and Bartlett's staging of it. As a result an audience becomes attuned to modes of theatrical reception and the particular subtleties of the central actors' performances. Alexandra Poulain argues that the ex-centric mystic Matt Talbot, the protagonist of Tom Kilroy's play *Talbot Box* (1977) exposes the homogenising and exploitative efforts of the Catholic Church by resorting to the tropes of the Passion narrative. For Poulain, Kilroy's grotesque representation of the joint attempts of ecclesiastical and temporal powers aims to appropriate Matt Talbot's private performance of the Christian Passion for their own purposes, submitting himself to a radical form of bodily exposure. Stewart Parker's *Pentecost* (1987), Christina Reid's *Tea in a China Cup* (1983) and *The Belle of the Belfast City* (1989), as well as Gary Mitchell's *Loyal Women* (2003) are the subject of Megan W. Minogue's paper. In the four plays, home and nation are closely interconnected, as one serves as a microcosm for the other; this is especially true for the female characters inhabiting these spaces, where they find comfort, and the possibility for their voices, conventionally silenced by the predominantly male presence in Northern Irish politics, to be heard. Yet despite their power over the domestic sphere, their dominance is continually subverted, due to economic, sexual, and political oppression. Virginie Privas-Bréauté's essay deals with Owen McCafferty's *Mojo Mickybo* (2002) set in 1970 Belfast. Drawing extensively on Brechtian dramatic devices and strategies, including an unconventional use of typographical elements,

McCafferty's play emerges as an ex-centric act of resistance to the endless violence of the Troubles. The Brechtian influences embedded in the play are also evidenced by *Mojo Mickybo*'s didactic stance, in that it underlines its post-colonial dimension and the need to leave sectarianism behind.

Two essays focus more closely on issues of sexuality and gender. Drawing on Roger Casement's controversial *Black Diaries*, Jeffrey Dudgeon offers a reading of the debate surrounding the Irish nationalist hero. In spite of the cult developed by Irish Catholic nationalists in his home country, in which he is figured as fundamentally sexless, Dudgeon provocatively demonstrates that he had a very active sexual life as a gay man. This he does by examining Mario Vargas Llosa's view of Casement's sexuality in his *Dream of the Celt* (2010), and providing extensive documentation of the controversy itself. In Éibhear Walshe's "Introduction" to the three short writings by Kate O'Brien on Italy and Rome, he sheds some light on her lesbianism following this Irish literary icon through her journeys across Italy, which influenced her imagination. Walshe contextualises O'Brien's travel writings published in the late 1950s and early 1960s in journals and magazines, suggesting that Rome provided O'Brien with a vital source of inspiration as well as infusing new energies in her career as a novelist. In Walshe's own assertion, "[t]hese writings are the clue as to the Rome Kate O'Brien invented for herself, her ideal city" (64).

In her essay, Antonella Trombatore applies ecocriticism and mathematics to the study of ex-centric identities, both natural and human, in Edna O'Brien's 2002 novel *In the Forest*. Focusing on the ex-centricity of the forest, the murderer, and the female (as) victim, Trombatore shows that in O'Brien's novel a displacement is taking place, whereby the identities of the three elements are moved "from the border to the centre", thus reasserting their own essential ex-centricity. Edna O'Brien is also the subject of the essay by Marisol Morales Ladrón, whose analysis takes its lead from Irish post-famine female migration to the US and investigates unsuccessful stories from the Irish diaspora in O'Brien's *The Light of Evening* (2006), which Ladrón discusses in tandem with Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn* (2009). Drawing on the topical connection of the (Irish) mother and the motherland, Ladrón exposes the conflicts at the heart of the characters' relationship with their mother/land, at the same time showing two complementary views of female migration from Ireland – an aspect that, in her opinion, has been almost totally ignored by O'Brien's and Tóibín's contemporary critics and reviewers. Terry Phillip's study of two different groups of novels authored by Sebastian Barry attempts to trace the histories of characters who have been relegated to the margins of Irish historical narrative(s). As Phillip's herself claims, instead of revisiting national history, Barry is trying "to present the plight of often isolated individuals and to reveal the complexity of the situations in which they find themselves" (235). This Phillip's shows with her reading influenced by theories on collective memory and history. The post-2005 poems of Derek

Mahon are the subject of Mélanie White's paper. In it, she discusses in detail Mahon's own reflections on global changes and their effects on Irish society – including the economic crisis, immigration, and global climate change. Mahon's recent investment in "the global" is seen through the lens of three different tropes that White aptly locates in marginal, peripheral sites from where to remap alternatives to the present. The section "Notes in Dis-Order" closes with Giovanna Tallone's reading of Clare Boylan's short-story "The Secret Diary of Mrs Rochester", in which Boylan rewrites Charlotte Brontë's classic *Jane Eyre* (1847) by speculating on the heroine's married life. Boylan's is no doubt a substantially ex-centric text, as demonstrated by her parody of Victorian narrative conventions dealt with by Tallone. Writing her diary from the enclosed space of her own claustrophobic red room, Boylan's "Jane" shares much with the protagonist of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). The two stories help Tallone discuss the nature of elusive personal stories written by the two women from their secluded spaces, cast as powerful examples of intertextuality and metanarrative.

Another group of essays deals with the Celtic Tiger "myth" from different perspectives. Timothy J. White maintains that in the 1990s Ireland's long struggle for economic autonomy and independence was compromised by the attempt to integrate the Irish economy in the world market to satisfy the demand for short-sighted materialism. This dependence on international markets led to a financial crisis and a final crash: materialism was the cause of the rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger. According to White, the Irish have successfully developed policies that have attracted foreign investment and are aware that these policies should continue to provide economic growth in the future, but "correct or wise economic policies need to be accompanied by a new value system that corrects the excesses of individual greed and the material expression of one's worth". What Ireland needs is perhaps a "set of goals and policies that may not yield massive short-term gains but are more effective in the long run" (106). For Susan Nitzsche the periphery (and core) model, and the discussion about Ireland's position in the world economy, have been at the centre of social debate for decades, a debate that was most heated during the Celtic Tiger and post-Celtic Tiger years. Whereas Ireland has universally been perceived as being at the core of the European integration project, there is no consensus whether Celtic Tiger-Ireland eventually managed to leave the economic periphery or semi-periphery. Furthermore, the Celtic Tiger did not succeed in reducing regional disparity within the Republic, and this provoked an increased focus on the internal periphery and core. The perceptions of Ireland's economic development and its role in the European Union are now negatively influenced by the present recession. Nitzsche's conclusion is that "transforming the economy of the western periphery towards a so-called smart economy and sustainable growth could lead Ireland on the track towards becoming a core economy" (133). In Jason Matthew Buchanan's opinion, in

Ireland, throughout the Celtic Tiger years, the ideas of what constituted the “home” were transformed by a speculative form of capitalism that recreated domestic space as a fluctuating and valuable commodity. By centralizing the connection of urban space to capitalism, speculation opened the domestic spaces of the home to the processes of speculation and devaluation. Buchanan’s essay analyses how changing the economic parameters of domestic space created a concomitant change in how homes are figured in the Irish cultural lexicon. Through the connection of spatial and cultural transformation, Buchanan’s contribution analyses Deidre Madden and Anne Haverty’s fictions, frames speculation as a parody of communal life that eliminates any real interpersonal relationships, and articulates how the lasting damage that followed the collapse of the Tiger altered the way the Irish understood the concepts and realities of the “home”.

Jerusha McCormack’s essay is devoted to Irish Studies in China, where over the last few years, they have emerged as an acknowledged academic field in several important Chinese universities, and enquires about the obstacles to Irish Studies in China as well as Ireland’s importance, after the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, in stimulating a debate on the role of literature in building up a new national identity. The many affinities between Irish and Chinese culture have ensured that translations of Irish writers – Wilde, Yeats, Shaw, Beckett and notably Joyce – have played an important role in affirming “China’s newly rising status, giving evidence of how literary revolution can inspire political action – as well as ushering the new China into its own version of modernity and so into the myriad possibilities of its future” (178).

Our journey across ex-centricity ends with two unpublished poems by Frank McGuinness, “Aeneas” (357) and “Other Men” (359). Their ex-centricity is revealed from the start, since McGuinness’s poetry has often been erroneously overlooked due to his successful and longstanding career as an international playwright. This is partly the reason why, in the interview that follows the two poems, McGuinness delves into key themes of his writing, not only for the stage – and which include his perceptions on the idea of Irishness, and its relation to the role played by women in particular, queerness, and the power of love seen and experienced as something fundamentally exceeding rigid definitions and conventional performances of gender, class, sexuality, and the Nation.

Works Cited

- Alloway Lawrence (1963), “Francis Bacon. A Great, Shocking, Eccentric Painter”, *Vogue*, CXLII, November 1, 136-139.
- Barber Fiona (2008), “Disturbed Ground. Francis Bacon, Traumatic Memory and the Gothic”, *Irish Review* 39, 125-138, 157.

- Cass Brian, Cristina Kennedy, eds (2013), *Changing States: Contemporary Irish Art and Francis Bacon's Studio*, Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, Dublin.
- de Lauretis Teresa (1990), "Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness", *Feminist Studies* 16, 1, 115-150; reprinted in Ead. (2007), *Figures of Resistance: Essays in Feminist Theory*, edited and with an Introduction by Patricia White, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 151-182.
- Derrida Jacques (1978 [1966]), "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", in Id., *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 278-294.
- Liddel George Henry, Robert Scott (1953), *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, <<http://www.tlg.uci.edu/lsj/#eid=1&context=lsj>> (12/2013).
- Newman Saul (2001), *From Bakunin to Lacan: Anti-Authoritarianism and the Dislocation of Power*, Lexington books, Lanham (MD).
- Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition, <<http://www.oed.com/>> (12/2013).
- Somerville-Large Peter (1990 [1975]), *Irish Eccentrics*, Lilliput Press, Dublin.
- The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, online edition, <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/>> (12/2013).